

### Training Responsible Journalists in China: Guiding Domestic Opinion, Gaining Foreign Audiences

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# Training Responsible Journalists in China: Guiding Domestic Opinion, Gaining Foreign Audiences

Laura DOMBERNOWSKY

**Abstract:** The teaching of international journalism in China serves a dual purpose: to train professionals who can strengthen the country's international media and to guide domestic opinion on international issues. This article follows one class of students at Tsinghua University in Beijing and investigates how they are taught to gain foreign audiences, stay loyal to the party line, protect national interests at home and abroad, and be critical of foreign media reports. On this basis, the article discusses how the concept of professionalism, within the specific context of international journalism, is contested by competing views on what it means to be a responsible journalist.

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**Keywords:** China, journalism education, professional values

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## Introduction

“I don’t know if I have been brainwashed by Tsinghua or China, but I really think the media should serve the interests of the country,” argued Wang Guomei, a student of international journalism and communications at Tsinghua University, in our first interview (Anonymous 1 2012). It was not surprising that she expressed an obligation to serve her country. As an elite student and a party member, she had been taught this throughout her life. At the age of 24, she had been subjected to the national “Patriotic Education Campaign,” which was launched in 1991 and aimed to use

history education as an instrument for the glorification of the party, for the consolidation of the PRC’s national identity, and for the justification of the political system of the CCP’s one-party rule. (Wang 2008: 784)

Wang Guomei had consciously accepted her role of serving state interests. But when we met again more than one year later, her views had changed (Anonymous 1 2013). Through internships, intensive reading of Western media, and classes in English news writing, she had gained insight into how a lack of respect for professional judgment posed risks to the quality of reporting. She had started questioning whether or not the media should be used as a vehicle to serve state interests.

Over a period of almost two years, I followed a group of Chinese students who studied international journalism and communications. The transition that Wang Guomei went through illustrates the double bind she and her fellow students felt caught in when balancing the ideological imperatives of their education – to be critical of foreign media, to stay loyal to the party line, and to protect national interests at home and abroad – with the need to attract foreign audiences by providing trustworthy, well-told, and convincing media reports to domestic and international audiences. During internships, through reading Western theories of journalism, and by following Western media coverage, the students were exposed to ideals of professionalism that did not correspond with what they were taught in class: they started questioning what it means to be a professional, responsible journalist in China today.

The main aim of this article is to explore how competing perceptions of professionalism in Chinese journalism are articulated locally

in teaching and how they are interpreted by students of international journalism and communications. To support this, I first give an overview of the historical and institutional set-up of international journalism and communications education in China and explain how this differs from journalism teaching in China at large. After introducing my interviewees, I go on to examine the Chinese discourse on international journalism in order to outline the academic and ideological contexts of my interviewees' university training. On this basis, I will discuss how the official construct of professionalism in the specific context of international journalism is challenged by the concurrent attempt to attract foreign audiences.

## Training International Media Talent

When Chinese universities reopened in 1978 after the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), journalism education was quickly re-established around the country as an extension of existing Chinese literature and English departments. Parallel to this development, US-inspired curriculum content was reintroduced into Chinese journalism education by educators from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and through direct interactions with educational institutions in the United States (Yong and Lee 2009). Chinese journalism education is entirely under the administration of the Ministry of Education (MoE). The curriculum and design of course content follow the party line. Across different journalism schools in China there is, however, a huge variety in how and what practical skills are taught to journalism students, and whether or not they have internships, and for how long. According to Guo Zhongshi, individual lecturers have some degree of autonomy in deciding teaching content (Guo 2010).

As early as 1978, a bilingual (English/Chinese) course in journalism education had been established at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Similar programmes soon spread to other universities and this trend, along with the overall expansion of Chinese journalism education in the 1990s, persisted (Guo 2004). To further enhance China's international communication work, in 2009, the MoE and the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (中共中央宣传部, *zhonggong zhongyang xuanchuanbu*) identified Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China (People's University of China), the Communication University of China, Beijing

Foreign Studies University, and Fudan University in Shanghai as pilot universities to set up master's degree programmes in international journalism and communications. In 2011 the number of universities in the programme was reduced to three when Fudan University and Beijing Foreign Studies University exited the initiative. This strengthening of the training of journalists with a specialisation in international journalism and communications reflects the overall strengthening of the fields of international communications and public diplomacy in China (Brady 2012). Along with China's increasing involvement in international affairs, the country has become more sensitive about how it is portrayed in the world. In order to limit the risks of global interaction and maximise its influence, the party-state relies on strengthening communications control through the Chinese propaganda system (Edney 2014). In recent years, China has upgraded the ministry spokesperson system (Chen 2011), initiated soft power and public diplomacy strategies (Barr 2011, 2012; Wang 2011), and invested in Chinese media organisations with a global outreach (Xin 2012).

The elements that make these MA programmes in international journalism and communications different from other journalism programmes with an emphasis on language training are, first, their close cooperation with China's state-owned media organisations with a global outreach – China Central Television (CCTV), *Xinhua News Agency*, *China News Service* (CNS), *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, and China Radio International (CRI) – and, second, their official endorsement from the party organs and state departments responsible for international communications: the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee, the State Council Information Office, and the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This official backing of Tsinghua University's programme was emphasised in the call for applicants put out by the university's School of Journalism and Communication: "The programme receives strong support from the relevant ministries, media and the university with regard to teaching, internships, and employment" (Tsinghua University 2011).

During the two years' training provided by Tsinghua University, this cooperation with both state institutions and state media manifests itself through the mandatory internships that students take with one of the associated media outlets and through lectures given throughout the programme by experienced state media journalists

and government public relations workers. For instance, when I visited Tsinghua University in the autumn semester of 2011, lectures were given and whole courses were taught by the deputy director of the General Administration of Press and Publication (中华人民共和国新闻出版总署, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo xinwen chubanshuzhu*, GAPP), Li Dongdong; *Xinhua News Agency* journalist Si Jiuyue (Si had previously worked for *Xinhua's* Los Angeles office); Duan Jiyong from *Xinhua's* International News Editorial Office; and CRI editor Guan Juanjuan. This cooperation with state institutions and central media organisations served to gradually introduce students to future careers as journalists within China's state media outlets or as PR workers in government agencies. When the MA programme was launched in 2009, *Xinhua News Agency* praised the training of “top talents of international journalism and communications” who can serve “mainstream media of international propaganda” (*Xinhua* 2009). Although the *Xinhua* news story highlighted the programme's international journalism training only in relation to global audiences, my fieldwork at Tsinghua University showed that the reporting of international news to domestic audiences was an equally important aspect of the school's teaching.

## Tsinghua University Is Red

This research followed one class of students at the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing who were enrolled in the two-year MA programme in International Journalism and Communication (国际新闻传播, *guoji xinwen chuanbo*) in the autumn of 2011 and who graduated in either 2013 or 2014. I conducted the first interviews during the autumn of 2011 and early winter of 2012 and the second round of interviews in the spring of 2013, after the students had completed their mandatory internships. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 out of the 24 students, and all students have been given pseudonyms in this paper. As a visiting PhD student to Tsinghua University in autumn 2011, I was allowed to observe all classes in journalism and communications. This study is based on a combination of content analysis of teaching material, class observations, student assignments, and interviews with students and lecturers.

Most national university rankings consistently place Tsinghua University as one of the top two universities in China. Several of

China's political leaders, including President Xi Jinping, former president Hu Jintao, and former premier Zhu Rongji, were educated at Tsinghua, giving the university a special reputation for being close to the political elite. In the interviews I conducted with journalism students in Beijing between 2011 and 2013, Tsinghua University's journalism students were often identified as being "different." According to their peers, Tsinghua University's journalism students were "closer to the party line" or were described, in even less flattering terms, as being "less open-minded." My Tsinghua interviewees were familiar with this reputation and did not reject it. When one Tsinghua international journalism and communications master's student I interviewed compared Tsinghua University to the university in Shandong where she obtained her undergraduate degree in journalism, she said, "Tsinghua is red and concentrates its efforts on the party" (Anonymous 1 2012). To my interviewees, this meant that being "a good student" at Tsinghua was not only about doing one's best academically. It was also about having a certain ideological understanding.

When launching its MA programme in International Journalism and Communication, Tsinghua University emphasised that the students would be trained to have

a high degree of social responsibility, historical commitment, professional pride, and a pragmatic and innovative spirit. They should understand China's history and culture, have insight into China's national conditions, and understand the global trends. (Tsinghua University 2009)

According to the application criteria of Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communication, the programme is directed towards students who hold a BA in language studies, international politics, journalism, or communications; have a high proficiency in English; have demonstrated academic excellence and rank among the top 5 per cent of their class; have good communication skills and strong organisational skills; are "keenly interested" in studying international communications; and aim to work within this field (Tsinghua University 2011).

The students in this study performed very well academically. They all had a high proficiency in English and/or other foreign languages. My interviewees appeared highly motivated to study and were generally well prepared for class. The educational backgrounds of the students varied. Some had a BA in journalism, others in foreign lan-



guages or Chinese literature. Some had obtained a BA degree from Tsinghua or other universities in Beijing, while others had graduated from other top universities in China, such as Zhejiang University. The majority of the students in the programme were party members and came from families where at least one parent was a party member.

My interviewees were highly skilled, motivated, and career-driven. However, when applying for this particular MA programme, most of them said they had not decided whether or not they wanted a career in journalism, in PR, or in something completely unrelated to their major. What had attracted them to this programme was that it appeared to have official recognition and provided qualified teaching and opportunities for internships – and potentially employment – in one of China's central media or government offices. In China's increasingly competitive job market, this MA seemed like a degree with a guaranteed job at the end of it. The students had also been attracted to the fact that they would obtain a high level of both Chinese and English communication skills.

After graduation in the summer of 2013, 12 out of the 24 graduates were employed as journalists. Three were employed as journalists in the editorial office for international news at *Xinhua News Agency* and three others were hired as journalists covering domestic news, also for *Xinhua*. Two were employed as journalists for CCTV and one for *People's Daily*, while the rest were employed as journalists for municipal- and provincial-level media. Of the remaining 12 who did not become journalists, one entered the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (中华人民共和国外交部, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiaobu*) and one entered the Ministry of Commerce (中华人民共和国商务部, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo shangwubu*). Five graduates entered different state-owned enterprises. The remaining five graduates were employed by private companies in China or enrolled in PhD programmes in the United States. With only three graduates out of the 24 in jobs directly related to international journalism and one in a job related to foreign affairs, the students' career choices did not seem to correspond well with the programme's aim of producing international media talent. But with time, it is possible that, as they climb their career ladders, the graduates employed by CCTV and *Xinhua* may eventually be transferred to those organisations' respective editorial offices for international news.

## External Propaganda and Protection of National Interests

Along with the introduction of market reforms in the 1980s, China began to establish a bureaucratic apparatus to strengthen communications and information targeted towards the world outside China. The CCP distinguishes between internal propaganda (对内宣传, *duinei xuanchuan*) and external propaganda (对外宣传, *duiwai xuanchuan*). In the beginning, this distinction was primarily based on the logic that not all information about domestic issues was suitable for a foreign audience and that, likewise, the Chinese public should have limited access to information from abroad (Brady 2009). Still today, China's international state media serve the dual role of filtering and delivering international news to a domestic audience and disseminating specific news and information about China and the country's official stance on domestic and international issues to the world. Edney (2014) asserts that China's international state media are both inward- and outward-looking. This means that, when reporting on international news to the domestic audience, Chinese journalists have to keep public sentiment in mind and guide public opinion towards the party line. Conversely, when reporting to an international audience, they are required to give China an official voice, while at the same time reporting in a way that does not scare foreign audiences away (Edney 2014).

As an attempt to break with what China regards as a stereotyped and largely negative narrative in the foreign media that ignores the positive accomplishments of the country, China is determined to strengthen its international media. This determination has, according to Lu Yiyi, “sprung from its belief that Western media cannot be trusted to portray China in an objective manner” (Lu 2012: 104). In his speech at the General Debate of the 65th Session of the United Nations' General Assembly, former premier Wen Jiabao called for a better understanding of what he termed the “real China” (真实的中国, *zhenshi de Zhongguo*). He emphasised that China is “firmly committed to peaceful development” and wants to “contribute to world peace through [its] development” (MFA 2010, official translation). In order to strengthen China's international media, Li Changchun, former member of the Politburo Standing Committee (Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau of the CCP, 中国共产党中央政治局常务委员会, *Zhongguo Gongchandang zhongyang zhengzhibu changwu weiyuan-*

*hui*), responsible for media, in his speech to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the CCTV, encouraged the Chinese media to

strive to be the first to use our voice, communicate our viewpoints, win the right to speak, and take control of actions and continuously strengthen the authority and impact of our mainstream media. (Li 2008)

However, Chinese efforts to portray “the real China” to the world are often met with a great deal of scepticism. As Barr says, China needs to develop sufficient communication skills to convince audiences abroad: “As is often the case in China, the software must catch up with the hardware” (Barr 2011: 57).

## Professionalism with Chinese Characteristics

In the literature, the concept of professionalism is often directly applied to the Chinese context without clarifying what professionalism means. In their study of job satisfaction among Chinese journalists, Chan et al. argue that Chinese journalists are in the process of professionalisation and that they are

import[ing] the Western vocabulary of professional journalism into China’s local context. [They point out that there is] a deep-rooted commitment to the interests of the public, to quality journalism based on the principle of factuality, and to practices consistent with ethical principles [among Chinese journalists]. (Chan, Pan, and Lee 2004: 256)

But the literature does not sufficiently clarify how the concept of professionalism is interpreted in China. As Polumbaum has formulated it, “One major challenge is figuring out just what professionalism or its Chinese equivalents might mean to Chinese practitioners, scholars, and officials” (Polumbaum 2011: 210). An excellent example of how Western definitions of values and standards of journalism are interpreted in a local context can be seen in Jennifer Hasty’s work on the journalistic practices of journalists in Ghana. She shows that the values, criteria of newsworthiness, and narrative techniques taught in journalism schools are all “locally determined by Ghanaian standards of discourse and sociality” (Hasty 2006: 69).

In the official Chinese discourse on articulating professional ideals, Pan and Lu point out that the term professional (专业, *zhuanyè*) is

often used in conjunction with terms such as “quality” (素质, *suzhi*) and “training” (训练, *xunlian*) (Pan and Lu 2003). According to the Chinese ethical code, some of the qualities that Chinese journalists should be officially trained in are “societal responsibility” (社会责任, *shehui zeren*) and an “understanding of the greater cause” (大局意识, *daju yishi*). Furthermore, the ethical code emphasises the need for journalists to respect national interests and the socialist cause (ACJA 2009). This means that Chinese professions are expected to have a cooperative relationship with dominant political institutions, rather than acting as independent supervisory bodies (Alford and Winston 2011). In the following, I will show how Chinese journalism students are instructed to become responsible professionals who are supposed to gain foreign audiences, be loyal to the party line, protect national interests at home and abroad, and be critical of foreign news reports about China.

At Tsinghua University’s MA in journalism and communications, the teaching was not textbook-based, but instead used a combination of exercises, lecturers’ handouts, and suggested readings of international scholars – for example, Joseph Nye and Mark Deuze. Based on my own participation in class, interviews with lecturers, and a review of their PowerPoint presentations and handouts, I observed that students were instructed to become responsible professionals who should serve Chinese interests.

## Gaining Foreign Audiences

In his speech to the students of international journalism and communications at the Communication University of China in 2010, Li Changchun stated that journalism students should look for inspiration from abroad and “grasp the work of international communication by the roots,” but they should never forget their “strong ideological spirit” (Li 2010).

By deliberately borrowing from Western methods of communication, China has, according to Brady, successfully restrengthened state propaganda to become more “market-friendly, scientific, high-tech, and politics-lite” (Brady 2012: 1). In the classes I observed, it was frequently pointed out that the Chinese media needed to improve their credibility (可信度, *kexindu*) and influence (影响力, *yingxiangli*) by adhering to the principles of reporting truthfully, accurately, compre-

hensively, and objectively – and by being among the first to report on international issues.

In the Chinese discourse on international journalism and communications, it is generally acknowledged that Chinese journalists and media workers need a profound knowledge and understanding of the culture and history of other countries in order for them to be able to adopt a journalistic style that foreign audiences are familiar with and are more likely to be sympathetic towards. They are encouraged to win the hearts and minds of foreign readers, listeners, and viewers: “China’s international journalists have to learn to tell stories about China in a way that foreigners can relate to,” argued PR advisor and vice president of the China International Public Relations Association (中国国际公共关系协会, *Zhongguo guoji gonggong guanxi xiehui*, CIPRA), Dong Guanpeng who taught the class of international journalism (Dong 2011). Furthermore, Dong pointed to the crucial challenge for China’s state media: presenting news reports that simultaneously improve party legitimacy and strengthen the credibility of China’s state media. “How can we make the party’s voice the most resounding? And how can we make information from the government the most trustworthy?” (Dong 2011) This predicament is central to China’s international state media, which seeks both to give China an official voice and improve the party’s image at home and abroad and to deliver news and information in a timely and comprehensive manner.

## Staying Loyal to the Party Line

The ideological framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics should unremittently arm our students’ brains and guide our students to have strong ideals and beliefs and always stick to the correct political orientation. (Li 2010)

In class, the students were instructed in the different social and political aspects of international newsmaking that Chinese journalists are expected to consider with regard to determining what and how to report. The students learned that defining newsworthiness in a Chinese context is never only a matter of professional judgement of the story’s timeliness, proximity, novelty, impact, usefulness, and so on, but requires an understanding and acknowledgment of political priorities and strategic national interests.

My interviewees were taught to be careful with terminology, since any inappropriate choice of language could have “fatal consequences.” As with the tricky business of diplomatic language, the language used by Chinese state media to report on sensitive issues also demands a careful choice of wording and formulation (提法, *tifa*) (Schoenhals 1992). Furthermore, to prepare them for future employment as journalists or PR workers, students were instructed to identify the political stance of party organs or government offices and to pay close attention to the wordings of texts and speeches. As Schoenhals (1992) notes in his work on formalised language in contemporary Chinese politics,

By proscribing some formulations while prescribing others, they set out to regulate what is being said and what is being written – and by extension what is being done. [...] [A]s an attempt to make the language of the state the sole legitimate medium of political expression, it also represents one of the most aggressive aspects of CCP propaganda. (Schoenhals 1992: 3)

As Schoenhals points out, Chinese political terms contain layers of meaning related to party ideology, Chinese culture, and national characteristics. As an example, one of the lecturers I observed pointed out that careless use of terminology could inadvertently cause a journalist to mistakenly acknowledge the legitimacy of the Japanese claim in the border dispute between China and Japan in the East China Sea. Therefore, journalists should always avoid using the phrase “the middle line of the East China Sea between China and Japan” and instead use the longer expression “the Japanese side’s so-called ‘middle line’ of the Eastern Sea” to emphasise China’s disapproval of this claim.

## Protecting National Interests at Home and Abroad

Reporting should benefit the stability of society, help protect our country’s international relations and establish our country’s image, and promote the impact, credibility, and authority of our media’s international reporting. (Anonymous 7 2011)

This statement from a lecturer’s notes to students in an international journalism class at Tsinghua University reveals that China’s international media have several responsibilities to live up to. The relation-

ship between international newsmaking and national interests was a core element of the teaching, both with regard to how journalists should portray China in international media and how international news issues should be reported to a Chinese audience. Lecturers emphasised that reporting on international issues could not be done without considering how the domestic audience would react. Today, the Chinese government's official standpoints on international issues and the ways in which Chinese issues are reported in media targeted towards foreign audiences can have a domestic impact and push public opinion in China away from the party line. This causes a dilemma for China's international media, summed up this way by Dong:

Protecting national interests is the most important issue for China's international media. That might be the reason why China is not popular. But sometimes either you will lose global support or you will lose domestic support. (Dong 2011)

Dong asserted that China's global media have to find "a fair and reasonable way to protect national interests at home and abroad." The strategic use of the media in order to guide public opinion is seen as a central tool for the party to maintain control within the public debate. This was the case with the outburst of public anger in spring 2005, when anti-Japanese demonstrations by Chinese people in several cities around the country were sparked by Japanese state approval of school textbooks that critics said omitted references to Japan's aggressions during the Second World War. During the 2005 anti-Japanese demonstrations, the Chinese government succeeded in appeasing the public through the mass media by initially tolerating strong expressions of discontent with Japan in the commercial media and reporting on the public demonstrations, but then eventually enforcing media restrictions before the anti-Japanese sentiment spiralled out of control, according to Stockmann's analysis (2010).

From my observations, lecturers distinguished between events that directly impact core national interests (for instance, the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the US sale of weapons to Taiwan, border disputes, etc.) and events that have an indirect impact. The events in the latter category are those that at first sight do not seem to involve or affect China immediately (for instance, the US sub-prime mortgage crisis, climate change, the war against terror, etc.). In addition, lecturers adopted a strategy of heightened caution when dealing with various types of emergencies or "sudden events"

(突发事件, *tufa shijian*) – situations that require a relevant government ministry's instructions before they can be mentioned in any media reports. These are all incidents that could potentially create extensive media attention and, therefore, demand coherence between official statements and media reports (for instance, natural disasters, accidents involving negligence (责任事故, *zeren shigu*), public health, public security, national security, and minority and religious issues). This demonstrates that the Chinese propaganda apparatus is concerned with how the Chinese public reacts to such incidents. Using the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan on 11 March 2011 as a case study, the lecturer instructed the students to balance their reporting with national sentiment. The timing of the Japan disaster, coming just one day after an earthquake had struck Yingjiang County in Yunnan Province, meant that special care had to be taken when reporting it. The class was instructed to balance all aspects of their reporting of the two earthquakes, even with regard to the number of reports. Although the severity of the Japanese earthquake and subsequent tsunami, with a death toll of more than 19,000 people and the risk of nuclear pollution due to the collapse of the Fukushima nuclear power plant, made the earthquake in Yunnan Province, with fewer than 30 deaths and 300 injuries, appear insignificant, the lecturers stressed how reporting on the two “sudden events” in this example could be used as a vehicle to promote national cohesion and sympathy across nations. The students were taught that any news coverage of the two disasters aimed towards a domestic audience had to be sure not to neglect the Yunnan quake victims and that the news coverage should express the “heartfelt concern” of the state and the party. To attract domestic media attention to Yingjiang County, former premier Wen Jiabao paid an official visit to the site of the Yunnan earthquake on 19 March 2011.

It is no coincidence that China's officials and the media paid attention to the victims of the Yingjiang County earthquake in the midst of the much larger Japanese disaster. In class, the lecturers stressed that major news incidents in Japan always demand that journalists consider the reactions of audiences both at home and abroad. Throughout the 1990s, Japan's aggressions towards China during the Second World War were systematically used as part of China's patriotic education and, today, public discourse is easily incited (Shirk 2007). The relationship between the two countries had already deteri-



orated sharply in September 2010, when Japan arrested a Chinese skipper whose trawler had collided with Japanese patrol boats in disputed waters. The Chinese media, therefore, have to consider domestic reactions carefully and report on matters in a “highly responsible way” in order to maintain stability. In class, the lecturers stressed that reporting should seek to achieve “a positive public opinion” and to “improve the trust and feelings between the people of China and Japan.”

## Being Critical of the Foreign Media’s China Coverage

Born in the early 1990s, my interviewees were exposed throughout their schooling to the patriotic education initiatives adopted after the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989. The initiatives were meant to stimulate a spirit of national pride, self-confidence, and socialism with Chinese characteristics (Wang 2008). At the same time, the students were well informed and interested in news and debates on corruption scandals, misconduct by local officials, political reforms, environmental issues, social disputes, and other similar topics that question the official interpretation of social issues. My interviewees would enthusiastically talk about the long history of China’s civilisation and its rich and profound culture. They also defended China’s strong position on the international scene. But at the same time, they expressed criticism of government deficiencies at local and central levels, the lack of openness in the Chinese government, and the negative effects of restrictive media policies. This meant that the students, in spite of their national pride, at times had trouble expressing a heartfelt approval of the Chinese leadership. Li Na tried to explain this confusion of feelings:

There are a lot of [young people] who love this country, but they don’t necessarily think that this government can realise their ideals. They feel dissatisfied. They have strong patriotic feelings and hope that China will become strong. But they cannot stand the stupidity of this government. (Anonymous 2 2012)

Compared to the average Chinese citizen, my interviewees were well informed about national and international news. They subscribed to newsfeeds from both foreign and domestic media and checked the

news several times a day. They enjoyed reading the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, and online news via the BBC's website, and they were not ignorant about the differences in the ways stories are framed in the Western and Chinese media. My interviewees had enough knowledge about news reporting in the West to be familiar with the Western media's tendency to prioritise negative stories – even stories that had the potential to damage their home nation's international standing. But when it came to negative stories about China, they could not help but interpret this as a direct expression of Western hostility towards China. Their national sentiment was offended by the fact that the foreign media seemed blind to taking specific Chinese conditions (e.g. China's economic development, huge population, and political system) into consideration and instead focused their reporting on issues that made China as a nation “lose face” to the world. Furthermore, they were convinced that this biased reporting in the Western media was to blame for the exaggerated negative image of China globally. Wang Sheng argued,

There is a judgemental aspect in foreign media reports – it is like they are a cut above you morally and are more righteous. It is as if they think that they [can] judge someone who is lagging behind – a country that is not as good as they are. (Anonymous 3: 2012)

Negative sentiments like these towards the foreign media's “overly” critical handling of news reports on and relating to China are widespread among China's nationalist youth. One of the most prominent examples was CNN's reporting of the unrest in Tibet before the Olympics in 2008, where Chinese netizens criticised CNN for allegedly intentionally cropping an image in order to show the Chinese military's brutality while screening out Tibetan protesters throwing stones at Chinese trucks (*Xinhua* 2008). CNN refuted all allegations, but three years after the incident, my interviewees still used this example to demonstrate the Western media's political bias in their China coverage. This confirms Stockmann's (2010) argument that the Chinese audience in general appears to stay loyal to domestic media when it comes to news stories that challenge China's core national interests (for instance, Tibetan demands for independence, border disputes, or international criticism of China in general).

My interviewees argued that it was as if every major event was used as an excuse to publish stories that could portray China and the Chinese government in a bad light. They described this as an expres-

sion of a “Western mindset” among foreign correspondents. Li Na criticised the foreign media for misusing negative stories to express a general critique of China:

If you, for instance, think of pollution – Beijing has problems with air pollution. That is a fact. And foreign media use this fact to say something about China. There is nothing you can do, because it is the truth. It is not so that they actually condemn China. What they do is that they present some facts, but when you look closer you can see that they are actually criticising China. (Anonymous 2 2012)

My interviewees asserted that the foreign media tended to focus on the negative aspects of an event. They could not understand the angle or standpoint that foreign correspondents chose to report on when covering news stories that in my respondents’ views could only be positive. For example, when in 2009 the official Chinese media and other Chinese media celebrated the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China in numerous positive reports, the foreign media did not follow suit. To the disappointment of Ji Xiuling, former president Hu Jintao’s review of Chinese troops at the military parade was interpreted negatively by foreign correspondents:

At the big celebration of the 60th anniversary that for China in general was seen as a positive event, foreign media instead described the review of the troops as a show off – as if there was something suspicious about all of it. (Anonymous 4 2012)

Over and over again, my interviewees repeated variations of the question: “Why do foreigners misunderstand China?” They argued that if foreigners got to know the “real China,” they would understand that the country and its people are in fact not that bad at all. The students’ disappointment with the foreign media’s China coverage combined with their conviction that the world would benefit from understanding China better seemed to encourage the students to improve the Chinese media’s international news coverage and to attract audiences in the West:

China is often depicted as this big, red, dangerous dragon, but if foreigners get to know it, they will find out that it is actually a nice dragon. (Anonymous 5 2012)

Among my interviewees there was an underlying concern that China lacked a credible media platform to counter the hostile Western me-

dia discourse. Li Na was disappointed that China had not yet found an effective way to respond to criticism in the foreign media:

The Chinese reports will criticise the West for not being responsible or something like that and use big words. But China will rarely elaborate the facts. I think that is not very effective. (Anonymous 2 2013)

In the following, I will discuss my interviewees' suggestions for changes in the Chinese media system that would allow them to be responsible professionals who serve state interests, though in ways that conflict with what they were taught in class.

## A Responsible Professional?

Since the MA programme ultimately is to be evaluated against its success in training future international media leaders who could “win over” foreign audiences, the programme is interwoven with international discourse on professionalism in journalism. Lecturers used the terms “professional” and “responsible” to describe how journalists should use professional skills to report in an accurate, scientific, well-written, and timely manner, and at the same time be loyal towards the party line and produce journalism that serves the state. In this way, they referred to the ideal-typical values of objectivity, actuality, and validity, but downplayed or even ignored the autonomy of journalists to make professional judgements and the protection of journalists' rights when investigating and reporting information (Deuze 2005). By bending the concept of professionalism to suit the Chinese context, the lecturers constructed an ideal for journalists that required both an ideological understanding of the party line and strong journalistic skills. However, my interviewees' training was not limited to the classroom or the Tsinghua University campus – a six-month long, mandatory internship linked the training to practices in the Chinese state media. Furthermore, throughout their studies, the students were encouraged to read Western media in order to learn their narrative style and how they framed certain topics.

The MA programme's specific aim of training talented media workers for China's international media meant that the students evaluated it on the basis of how well they thought their training would equip them to produce journalism that would attract foreign audiences. Outside the classroom, my interviewees distanced themselves

to some degree from the ideological values taught in the programme. Instead, students created their journalistic identity by articulating similarities and differences between themselves, their classmates, and lecturers – an identification process through which they negotiated their individual professional values as future journalists.

The interviews, conducted over two different periods of the subjects' studies, provide insights into how the students' views changed over time regarding both what constitutes professionalism in journalism and the media's role in society. My interviewees did not see themselves as a threat to the party-state and they had no intention of changing China's political system in any fundamental way. But this did not mean that they uncritically accepted the current practices in either the Chinese or the foreign media. Instead, they were disappointed that the Chinese state media were out of sync with common international journalism practices and thus unable to attract foreign audiences. They believed that China needed a voice on the international stage but, at the same time, they saw political considerations as a significant obstacle in the way of efforts to brand the Chinese media as a credible alternative to foreign news services. They argued that unless more openness and autonomy were granted to Chinese journalists, China's international media stood no chance of competing with foreign international media in attracting foreign audiences. In the following, I will discuss my interviewees' interpretations of what they perceived to be the key qualities of developing responsible media professionals.

## Openness

In line with what they were taught in class, my interviewees agreed that inspiration from media practices in the West was necessary in order to attract international audiences. However, their suggestions as to how the Chinese media might succeed in this endeavour required more radical changes. Both the style and content of China's official media were subject to criticism among my interviewees. Li Jun expressed his frustration about having to live up to a set of ideals that conflicted with his own perceptions of good journalism:

If you go and work for a party paper or an official paper, you have to be the mouthpiece of the party and the government. Then, you have to speak for them and may have to pay more attention to the

form and the way you report. That does not mean that the reports are not professional, but it might be inconsistent with the way you used to think. (Anonymous 6 2012)

Li Jun argued that there were situations when journalists had to follow guidelines that clashed with their own ideals in order to keep their job. My interviewees saw the administration's control of the media as an impediment and expressed doubt that the Chinese media would gain more market shares internationally if changes were limited to adjustments in journalistic style, less coverage of meetings and signing ceremonies, and more reporting of issues relating to the lives of ordinary citizens. The changes they suggested were more profound. Wang Sheng argued,

The reason why foreign media do well is because they speak the truth. They tell stories, they use quotations, and they have real people speak out. But in Chinese news reports, it is often the government that speaks in the words of officials (官话, *guanhua*); there are no ordinary people who speak and there is no story. People of course get the impression that "here comes some propaganda again that has no truth in it." (Anonymous 3 2012)

My interviewees applauded journalists who shed light on unscrupulous businesses, corruption, and other social issues as long as they did not question the legitimacy of the party-state. The students argued for changes both with regard to the reporting style and the autonomy of journalists to decide which news stories to cover. However, they did not question the prevailing attitude that Chinese journalists had an overall responsibility to pay attention to national stability.

## Autonomy

Even in the first round of interviews, my interviewees were aware of an alternative definition or "ideal" of professionalism that emphasised autonomy and allowed journalists to rely on their professional skills to make their own judgements in finding interesting news stories. However, they also accepted that, in doing so, Chinese journalists had to consider the overall political framework they were part of. Li Jun argued,

When you do journalism, there are matters that can have a negative effect or will impact public opinion. This kind of matter ex-

ists. And I understand that [journalists] sometimes have no choice.  
(Anonymous 6 2012)

Before Wang Guomei had any practical experience in journalism, she argued that journalists should serve state interests:

I don't think you, as a journalist, should only work to realise your dream of a free media. I have a bigger dream: to use journalism to improve the development of this country and for the benefit of the Chinese people. (Anonymous 1 2012)

Her views had changed, however, when I interviewed her again after she had completed her mandatory internship at CCTV's international news office. She now found that her editor's decisions conflicted at times with her own professional values. She now argued that allowing political goals to influence news criteria could be problematic, even when it served to improve the Chinese media's credibility at home through criticism of the Western media (Anonymous 1 2013). For example, she was stunned when she learned that her editor wanted to give high priority to the story about the child sex abuse scandal involving BBC television and radio personality Jimmy Savile (Anonymous 1 2013). She agreed that the story definitely had news value but argued that there was a strong political drive behind her editor's decision to cover a story that could portray the BBC negatively and hence was an opportunity to potentially discredit the foreign news media.

On the eve of graduation, my interviewees appeared not to blindly accept their role as future media talents who would serve state interests. Instead, they questioned what they were taught and had experienced during their internships. The students shared the overall aim of protecting national interests. They agreed to use journalism to guide public opinion and to promote national stability, and they were frustrated by how the foreign media appeared to discredit China. However, they argued that the Chinese media's credibility depended on making improvements in the areas of openness and the autonomy of journalists. In other words, they believed that giving journalists leeway to select and write news reports based on professional judgement would benefit, rather than harm, China's international image.

## Conclusion

The training of international media workers in China has a strong emphasis on the dual role of international newsmaking: guiding domestic public opinion by controlling what information reaches the home audience and strengthening official presentations of China in media targeted towards foreign audiences. This confirms that China's international state media are both inward- and outward-looking. This double role requires that journalism students are taught to both to master the practical skills of international journalism and to identify with the ideological baseline of the CCP. The students are trained to stay loyal to the party line, to protect national interests at home and abroad, and to remain critical of the foreign media's news coverage of China. However, this clashes with the aim of training journalists who can attract foreign audiences and deliver timely and comprehensive news and information in an appealing manner. This apparent contradiction within the aims of the MA programme in international journalism and communications implies that the course cannot ignore the tensions between the official construct of professional ideals in journalism that require complete loyalty to the state and the party, and foreign audiences' expectations that journalists have professional autonomy in deciding the content and style of reporting in order to deliver news and information in a timely, comprehensive, objective, and appealing way.

My interviewees shared the overall aim of serving national interests and they were critical of the way in which the foreign media portrayed China. However, they did not believe that more openness and autonomy for journalists would pose any threat to the state. Conversely, they believed that China was in a position to gain from media reforms that would allow a free flow of information from China to the world and vice versa. This might indicate that after a period of time, my interviewees might be able to promote changes in journalistic practices in China as they advance in their careers. However, for the time being, it is evident that strong institutions continue to supervise and control individual journalists, particularly with regard to how politically sensitive news is covered at home and abroad.



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